

NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

PUBLIC HEARING on 2/27/2023

HB 6659 – AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2025,
AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.

Testimony of New Britain Museum of American Art

Good afternoon esteemed members of the Committee.

Let me begin by thanking you for inviting comments on the topic of expanded state funding for the arts. As the Director and CEO of the New Britain Museum of American Art, I would like to recognize and extend my appreciation to each of you for your support of the arts in years past.

This Committee's support, as well as the Executive Branch's support, was critical for our institution during the pandemic, as it was for many museums in Connecticut. We ask that the committee consider extending and increasing this commitment to the arts for the FY 2024 & 2025 budget. Not only are cultural organizations still grappling with the long-term effects of the pandemic, but they are capable of delivering so much more positive value to our society and to our economy with increased investment that is responsible, reliable, and sustainable.

Through arts enrichment programs, world class exhibitions, education initiatives and school programs, our organization serves to enrich lives in the city of New Britain, as well as visitors from across the region and the broader State of Connecticut. We stand as one of the nation's earliest museums devoted to American art, and maintain a collection of international caliber for the benefit of our public.

As a non-profit organization with considerable overhead expenses associated with caring for a collection and delivering enrichment programs to the public, contributed revenue is the key driver in our ability to positively impact people's lives. Historically, our levels of state funding for NBMAA have hovered in the range of 2-3% of operating budget, and far below the national averages for government support (which have been reported as 13-20% of contributed income among museums in other states). We are tremendously grateful for the funding we receive, but also acutely aware that deeper investment would allow us to deliver the full potential of our capacity to positively impact the public.

When museums were struggling to survive during the pandemic, The Connecticut Cultural Fund provided the NBMAA with unrestricted operating support of a higher level than usual – a boost that was vital to our operations and demonstrated what could be accomplished with unrestricted funding. It allowed us to stay open through the rest of the pandemic, hire teaching and performing artists, and retain our staff with competitive market salaries. In so doing, we were able to ramp back operations, more than doubling the participation in educational programs from 2021-2022, and increasing K-12 students served by more than 700%. It also allowed the continuation of marketing

activities for the museum's programs, which studies have since shown was a major factor in an institution's ability to emerge with strength from the pandemic.

While attendance is returning to more normal levels as the pandemic winds down, membership programs, and the revenues associated with them, will take years to recover. If government support drops, we will struggle to close operating deficits in the years ahead. I believe now is the moment for arts funding to be prioritized. Our museums in Connecticut can contribute more powerfully not only to the well-being of the people who live here, but also to our economy. But this will require investment comparable to that which other states have committed for museums. And it requires investment that is consistent and meaningful year over year, in order to reliably support exhibition development that is conducted on a multi-year timeframe.

As you know, the arts, culture, and tourism communities have advanced a proposal that is designed to address underfunding in the past by recommending an increase of \$58.5 million. With this expanded funding, Connecticut's tourism industry will grow and more fully compete with our surrounding states. And of critical importance to NBMAA, the plan also ensures that arts and cultural organizations that currently receive state funding, such as our Museum, will both maintain their current allocations and participate in a responsible increased level of state funding going forward.

Thank you again you for your consideration of support for our state's art, culture and tourism industry, and for increased funding that is long term, consistent, and direct for our state's museums.

Brett Abbott | Director and CEO

NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

56 Lexington Street
New Britain, CT 06052